

12/10 A-5

Navy will go ahead with use of toxic paint

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The Navy plans to proceed with the painting of several vessels using a toxic ship hull paint despite a strong protest from the state Department of Health.

The painting is expected to begin early next year.

"Nobody told us we can't," said Lt. Cmdr. Ron Morse, a Pearl Harbor shipyard spokesman. He referred further questions to the Naval Sea Systems Command, which has directed the shipyard to carry out the painting.

Spokesmen there could not be reached yesterday for comment.

Last month the Health Department told the Navy that it feels "strongly that Pearl Harbor is not an appropriate location to study" the paint and its effect on the environment.

The department raised "severe reservations" about the possible public health and environmental impact of the paints, which contain the pesticide tributyltin, or TBT.

The Health Department says, however, that it does not have the power to stop the Navy from conducting its study.

The Navy hopes eventually to paint its entire fleet with TBT paint because it discourages barnacles and other marine organisms from fouling ship hulls, adding to maintenance and fuel costs.

But scientists and environmentalists contend that TBT leaches off the hulls and harms marine life.

The paints were partially banned by such countries as Great Britain and France after they were linked to deformities in marine life.

Galen Gregory, president of the Metal Trades Council labor group, said union officials told shipyard safety officials about other types of paints that will do the job but do not contain TBT. But the shipyard has not responded, Gregory said.

In a Dec. 3 letter to Hawaii Sen. Spark Matsunaga, the Navy said the kind of TBT paint it will use is less toxic than other TBT paints, used by commercial and pleasure craft.

Capt. E.A. Sharp, director of the Naval Sea Systems Command congressional and public affairs office, told Matsunaga that "human health and environmental effects, if any, will be first noticed in pleasure craft marinas" where the use is heavier.

"Our Navy experience and research supports the position that worker safety and environmental protection have been safeguarded properly in the test plan," Sharp said.

Matsunaga sent a copy of Sharp's letter to the Health Department. The department has not had a chance to respond to the letter, an official said.